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Heritage Language vs. Dominant Language: When Bilinguals Excel in Unexpected Ways

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Abstract

Heritage bilinguals—who learned their L1 in their childhood home and L2 at school—vary greatly in their language and literacy skills. Although much is known about heritage bilingual children’s language and literacy development, less understood are psycholinguistic processes underlying literacy skills in heritage bilingual adults, which we examined here. Spanish(L1)-English(L2) heritage bilingual adults completed psycholinguistic and reading tasks in English and Spanish. Although participants’ English and Spanish verbal fluency did not significantly differ ($t=1.750$, $p=.118$), they read sight words more efficiently in English than Spanish ($t=5.371$, $p<.001$), suggesting asymmetries in language versus literacy skills. However, participants had better recollection for and familiarity with passages read in Spanish than English ($t_s>2.014$, $p_s<.04$), despite lower d' scores in Spanish than English reflecting greater uncertainty ($t=1.681$, $p=.066$). These findings suggest that memory is richer for passages read in Spanish than English, despite reading being more efficient in English than Spanish.